

Chapter 4

Liz saw Gretchen Klimek's shiny black Chevy Yukon parked just a few spaces away from the spot Liz was turning into. She hit the brakes. Hannah's birthday party was tomorrow, though; she didn't have time to come back later. That's why she was here, at Al's Market, instead of driving to Bridgeville to the big, new Hy-Vee, where she would never run into anyone she knew. She eased off the brakes, pulled in, and turned off the car. Maybe Gretchen was in the café or hardware store.

The air conditioner in her Taurus didn't work anymore, so she'd had the window down for the ten-mile drive into town. She quickly pulled the rubber band from her hair, gathered up the stray strands, and combed them back into a neater ponytail. She reached across to the passenger seat to grab her purse and looked down at her old, stained T-shirt from the basketball camp she'd gone to her sophomore year. Why hadn't she thought to change out of her cleaning clothes? She shook her head, irritated with herself for caring.

God, she hated coming into town. Even after all these years, the thought of running into her old classmates or teachers or coaches filled her with dread. Teen pregnancies were far from uncommon here, but Liz's had been different—Liz had been different. Because she'd had big plans for herself that didn't include marriage and a family and because she'd been excited about leaving the area, people had called her 'stuck-up', yet they'd expected more from her. And Cottonwood had a long memory when it wanted to. Don't dream big, she'd learned, when so many want you to fail.

She stared at the steering wheel. Just get in and get this over with, she told herself. She pulled the keys out of the ignition and opened the car door.

The heat was just as oppressive outside the car as inside, the sky the same gray as the sidewalk. Saturday, early afternoon—Liz had worried that the grocery store would be busy. But only a handful of cars were parked along the street. One of Al's bag boys in blue shorts and a clean apron, holding a cardboard box of groceries, pushed open the door in front of her and held it as a stooped, gray-haired woman, one of Liz's mom's Circle friends, shuffled out.

"Hi Betty," Liz said, grabbing the door.

Betty stopped and craned her head up to look at Liz. After a pause she said, "Hello, Liz," and her eyes crinkled in a smile behind her wire-rimmed glasses. "Your mom tells me you have a big party tomorrow. Hannah's turning seventeen? It sure goes fast, doesn't it?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued, slowly, towards her car, the bag boy following patiently. Liz watched as she carefully eased herself into the driver's seat of the beige Buick, lifting one leg, then the other into the foot well. Betty was one of those church ladies who seemed to have been born a widow in polyester pants, going to Circle every Wednesday evening and church service every Sunday morning and bringing a green bean casserole to every potluck dinner. Grocery shopping after lunch every Saturday was probably one more piece of her lonely routine.

Liz pulled the door open again and stepped inside the store. The air, cool and dry, was a relief at first but she knew she'd soon be freezing. She yanked a cart from the line and then quickly glanced around to see if there was anyone she needed to avoid. Immediately she saw Gretchen's bright blond head in the back of the store in the meat department. Her heart sank.

She knew Gretchen would be wearing an appropriate grocery-shopping outfit. She'd have a fashionable purse sitting in her cart and her fingernails and toenails would be matching. Liz looked down at her own toes, splayed blandly on top of her cheap Walmart flip-flops. They were clean, thank god, but hadn't seen a bottle of polish in years. She sighed. Who would have thought that between her and Gretchen, Gretchen would have been the one to make all the right decisions?

Gretchen was the first girl in their class to lose her virginity—the summer before their freshman year—to the Dzingle's grandson visiting from Denver. Gretchen's mom, who'd been single when there weren't many single moms in Cottonwood, had immediately put her on the pill. Liz remembered once, in study hall, Gretchen had been looking for something in her purse and dumped out all its contents on her desk. In the pile with a hairbrush, various tubes of lipstick, and a jangle of keys was the pink plastic case with the foil back.

"What happens if you forget to take one," Liz had asked, looking at the little dial with the days of the week.

Gretchen shrugged. "I don't know. My mom reminds me every day."

Gretchen began going with Brian when they were juniors. They stayed together through college at UNL, got married after graduation, and moved onto the farm to help Brian's parents. Within a few years, they'd been able to increase crop yields and beef production and had built the family farm into one of the largest operations in Central Nebraska. They'd waited a few years to have kids, going on cruises, ski trips, and almost every Husker football game. Now they had an eight-year-old, a five-year-old, and a toddler and had recently built a beautiful 3000 square foot house.

Gretchen hadn't cared about her grades or about what school organizations would look good on college applications. Her career goal had been to work at Dillards so she could get a discount on clothes. But now she helped run a huge, commercial farming operation and paid someone else to clean her house.

Liz hunched over her cart and quickly steered it towards the produce as far away from the meat department as she could get. She slowly made her way through the aisle, standing close to the displays, studying each potato, onion, green pepper intensely, head down.

"Liz?" she heard from behind. Her shoulders dropped as she turned to see Gretchen's sparkling white smile. "I thought that was you! How're you doing?"

Gretchen looked sincere. And why wouldn't she be? They'd always been friends in school—not the secret-sharing or talk-on-the-phone-all-day type. But they'd always greeted each other in the hallways and chatted at lunch and parties. Gretchen couldn't know that seeing her made Liz feel inadequate and pathetically jealous.

"Hey, Gretchen." Liz tried to act pleased to see her. Her voice sounded hoarse, so she cleared her throat. "I'm good. How about you?"

"I'm great." Gretchen rested casually against her grocery cart. "Gosh—I just never see you. Don't tell Al," she leaned in closer, secretive, "but I usually go to Bridgeville to go grocery shopping. The Hy-Vee there is amazing."

Liz laughed and relaxed a little. "Me, too." Now, though, she'd have to be on guard at that store as well. Maybe she'd start going to Hanover instead.

"You know," Gretchen started. Her cell phone chirped from inside her beige linen purse and she immediately dug it out. She looked at the screen, shook her head as if

irritated, tossed it back, and then smiled at Liz again. “I wanted to let you know that Trevor’s favorite swim teacher is Hannah. He absolutely loves her. I’ve watched her, too. She has such a way with kids, don’t you think?” Tilting her head to the side, she paused and her smile got bigger. “She should really be a teacher. Maybe third grade—just like her grandma?” Her perfectly shaped eyebrows raised in high arches.

Liz cringed and then tried to make it look like a shiver. Her mom was a fantastic teacher. And, although Liz had never felt comfortable around kids herself, she knew Hannah was a natural. But teaching seemed like such a mundane career. She wanted Hannah to pursue something exciting, unique; a job that took her places and gave her the opportunity to make a good living.

“I don’t know,” Liz said and shrugged. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her shorts, trying to warm them up. Goose bumps covered her arms. Gretchen looked completely comfortable in her khaki capris and matching jacket. “She’s never mentioned teaching. But she’s talked about everything else—from geology to finance.” That was a lie. Hannah had been frustratingly glib about her future, always changing the subject whenever Liz started talking about college and careers.

“Isn’t that what you were thinking of doing?” asked Gretchen. “I think international finance is what you put in the yearbook. What is that anyway?” She didn’t wait for an answer, thankfully, because Liz had never really known what it was. She had settled on it thinking it sounded like a bold career and that it would require her to work in a shiny high-rise and live in an exciting city. “Remember that picture of you and Clint in the bank?” Gretchen asked.